

**Written Testimony of Susan J. Keister**  
**prepared for the**  
**House Committee on Agriculture Hearing**  
**held on**  
**Monday, June 26, 2006**  
**at**  
**Canandaigua Inn on the Lake, Canandaigua, N.Y.**

Ladies and Gentlemen of the Committee:

I am both honored and awed by this opportunity to present both written and oral testimony on a topic which encompasses my profession, my work and my life.

Both my husband and I are graduates of the SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. I graduated in 1980 and he in 1976. My husband has worked as a NYS-DEC forester since 1979. Per the attached qualification summary, I have worked almost continually in the field of Resource Management since graduating college.

For the past 18 years my husband and I have been the fortunate owners of 130+ forested acres in the Finger Lakes Region of western New York State. We have harvested trees for our own use (the construction of a pole barn, hardwood flooring, dimensional construction lumber for house additions, and hardwood furniture and trim) and sold standing timber to the local forest industry. Recently, we expanded our interests into Christmas Tree farming through the lease of 3+/- acres of our neighbor's land. We were proud participants in the Christmas Spirit Foundation's "Trees for Troops" this past December in which 4,100 Christmas trees from 300 growers in 17 states were delivered by FedEx to five military bases in the U.S. and multiple locations in Afghanistan, Kuwait and Qatar.

Tree farming, for us, means fun, funds, family and friends.

## **Past Success/Failure of Forestry Cost-Sharing Programs:**

Although New York State currently contains a historically high number of forested acres, the *condition* of that forested land is not at it's historic best. From the perspective of diversity, potential wildlife habitat, forest health and species composition, New York's forests, in my opinion are worse now then they were when I started in my profession over 25 years ago.

My generation of forestry professionals owns part of that reality and it is not something of which we should be proud. Red maple, not the higher valued and more-unique-to-our-region black cherry, sugar maple, red oak or white ash, is currently the number one species in New York State. Historically, the number one species had been sugar maple, our state tree. In addition, the more valuable species which are in New York's forests are of a poorer quality (i.e., more bumps, holes and lower branches, smaller diameter, not as tall). And, according to the U.S. Forest Service national inventory, this trend is not unique to New York. Nor is this observation limited to those of us who work with standing timber. All one needs to do is poll forest industry and one will learn of the general decline in size and quality of the logs they are purchasing/sawing. This species shift/quality decline is a result of market condition forestry in which *all* foresters (state, consulting, industrial) must participate. That is, in my experience, in order to "get the cut out" more good trees must be cut during a harvest operation then poor ones. When done in the extreme, this type of cutting is called high grading.

At the same time that this species composition shift and overall grade decline has been occurring, state foresters, county foresters, soil and water conservation district foresters, professional consulting foresters, and industrial foresters have been working diligently to provide advice to landowners who have been motivated to management by organizations like the National Tree Farm Committee, Farm Bureau and state organizations like the New York Forest Owners Association. But something has gone wrong.

Do what you always do, get what you always get. And, when it comes to our nation's forest resource, I am not sure we should be satisfied with that result.

Traditional cost-sharing programs have been, first and foremost, underfunded. Too little money spread over too many places is resulting, in my opinion, in a net loss of benefits.

If we are serious about committing resources to America's forests, it is going to take more than some start up funding and an average allocation of \$10,000.00 per county per year.

Traditional cost-sharing programs have been too complicated and restrictive. I have sat through more training sessions than I care to remember on how to process the paperwork for the most recent ag bill's cost-sharing program. I have notebooks full of SIP instructions on my office book shelf. I have notebooks full of FLEP instructions. When I worked as a State Forester there was FIP. Too many acronyms, too much paper.

Traditional cost-sharing programs have focused on funding management *plans* not management *actions*. And, although I think a management plan document is essential in setting both a course and timetable for wood lot management activities, I think it is something that a landowner can pay for (average cost: \$1,200.00 for a document that has substance) as an "initiation fee" into the process. A way of buying into the recommendations the plan contains. People always pay more attention to things they have purchased or earned than something dropped in their lap for free. Both state and private consulting foresters could partake in this process with the money collected by state foresters for doing this work (yes, charge for the plan even if prepared by a state forester) augmenting the state's cost-sharing budget.

Traditional cost-sharing programs have focused on getting *some* dollars to a lot of people, not the *most-effective* dollars to the wood lots. It is almost as if the number of people funded, not the number/quality of trees helped is the goal of the program. If funding people, not improving wood lots is the primary goal of this legislation, one could only wonder that there could be way more efficient ways of achieving it.

## Forestry Cost-Sharing Suggestions

When I was working as a NYS Forester and overseeing cost-sharing programs, it was my understanding that never, never, do we cost share activities which could occur during, near, or subsequent to a commercial harvesting operation. "The landowner is making money, let them re-invest it in the wood lot" was the mantra.

In my opinion, that sort of thinking has lead, in part, to the poor state of our wood lots. Landowners, not knowing better, and feeling entitled to take the harvest money and buy a boat/send their kid to college/pay property taxes/keep the dairy going, did **not** re-invest back into the woods. They spent it.

And, it is at the time that commercial harvests are occurring that some of the most important woodlot management activities need to occur: site preparation for regeneration activities, thinning from below to reduce the presence of invasive/unwanted trees, grapevine removal. In the past, some loggers did do some of these activities as part of the sale, including their costs in their business plan, and reflecting the same in the amount paid for the timber. In today's market place, however, given the costs of production (e.g. fuel and insurance) there is no money left in the logger's budget to do these "extras". Landowners, over time have come to realize/expect the highest possible price for their timber, and in a world of constantly rising costs, the only way the average logger can meet these expectations is to cut out some of the extra services (which were only intermittently occurring to begin with).

As such, I propose that cost-sharing programs reverse their stance/regarding commercial activity and, instead, embrace it. Who better to cut grape vines/cut trees which need to come out but have no commercial value then loggers who have been professionally trained, have the proper safety gear and equipment and are onsite already? A pay rate could be worked out of so many dollars per acre for a stated density reduction that could be given to the loggers if this work were performed in accordance with a management plan prescription and under the direction of a professional forester.

What about subsidizing the cost of a professional, arms length, forester to “properly” mark a stand in the first place? Again, too many times landowners do not want to incur costs and are lured by the big dollar offered when all the quality trees in a woodlot are targeted for removal. Although removing all of the quality trees in a woodlot provides greater short term gains, it has been shown, scientifically, that, over time, properly managed woodlots produce more revenue. New York State had, at one time, a program in which state foresters marked woodlots for commercial harvest and charged for these services by the acre. This system could be re-visited, the rates raised and provisions provided for the use of private sector foresters by cost-sharing their fee (so that the rate charged by the state forester and the rate charged by the private consulting forester would be the same, leaving the consumer the ultimate freedom in making a choice of who he/she would like to work with).

Other activities which could be cost-shared directly to industry professionals:

1. Herbicide applications to deal with the challenges posed by invasive plant species as well as established, native, non-preferred species (such as beech, striped maple, fern, buckthorn, and multiflora rose);
2. Erosion and sediment control measures -again these could be activities subsidized at the time of a commercial harvest or separately;
3. Wildlife habitat management -targeting rare, threatened or endangered species (i.e. cost-sharing only game species if, based on inventory, there is an established lack of habitat/presence of these species on an owner's property).



## **Right to Practice Forestry**

My last comment would be that federal policy encourage that "Right to Practice Forestry" legislation be developed and implemented in each state. As a private forest owner and a practicing consulting forester, I see this issue, as one of private property rights and paramount in importance. People want to benefit from our products but don't want to put up with the inconveniences of production (mud on the road, noise from chainsaws, short term visual changes which occur with the harvesting of any crop be it corn or trees). If a property has a management plan in place (especially one written under the guidance of a federal cost-sharing program) then one ought to be allowed to implement the prescriptions/activities that plan contains. Activity registration with local municipalities who choose to require it, liability insurance, and routing considerations when town roads are involved all make sense as part of a supersedure/Right to Practice Forestry Initiative. Without federal insistence that this right be observed, I fear that all the woodlet improvement work previously addressed will be for naught. If every quality tree which is produced stands in the forest and can't be made into high quality hardwood furniture were all of our efforts in vain? Private property rights and the ability to harvest one's wood must be protected.

Thank you for this opportunity to enter my thoughts/opinions into the record,



## **SUSAN J. KEISTER, L.L.C.**

*New York State Woman-Owned BusinessEnterprise*

*Environmental Management and Forestry Consulting Services - Project Management  
Forest Management Planning- Timber Sales-Forest Inventory and Valuation FLEP & 480a Plans  
Timber Trespass & Damage Appraisals- Federal Wetland Delineation*

**7025 HARPERS FERRY ROAD-WAYLAND, N.Y. 14572**

**ph:585-728-3044 phone/fax:585-728-2786; email: susanjkeister@frontiernet.net**

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### **Summary of Qualifications - June 21, 2006**

#### **WORK EXPERIENCE:**

**1995 - PRESENT:** Consulting Forester; self-employed; activities include preparation of woodlot management plans; forest inventory and valuation; timber marking and sale administration; timber and loss valuations

**1989-1995:** Employed by Elam Sand and Gravel, Corp. as Environmental Resource Manger. Duties included: acquiring various New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Permits including mining permits, timber sales, storm water run-off permits, bulk fuel storage permits; coordinating land acquisition activities, supervising mining and restoration activities at 9 - 13 separate company facilities. This company remains a client to this day.

**1984 - 1989:** Employed in various titles for the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation; titles included: Forester, Pesticides Inspector, and Mined Land Reclamation Specialist.

**1983 - 1984:** Timber Buyer for Stuerwald Logging

**1981 - 1982:** Consulting forester employed by Forecon, Inc.

**1980:** Graduated Cum laude from the State University of New York College of Environmental Science and Forestry (ESF) with and Syracuse University; dual degrees: Bachelor of Science (Syracuse University) and Forestry/Resource Management (ESF)

#### **ASSOCIATIONS AND INTERESTS:**

Certified Member, Society of American Foresters; New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Listed Cooperating Consulting Forester; Past Chair, New York State Tree Farm Committee; Member, New York State Forest Owner's Association; Member New York Institute of Consulting Foresters

#### **FAMILY BACKGROUD AND INTERSTS:**

My husband of 25 years and I own 130+ acres of forest land in the Finger Lakes Region of western New York. This land is unique in that it has been managed, with the sporadic use of cost-sharing funds and advice from state foresters since the 1950's. We have sold logs and produced own lumber for use in construction projects on our property including a barn (red pine), hardwood flooring (beech) and two separate additions to our home (red pine dimensional lumber, misc. hardwood trim). We heat our home almost exclusively with wood harvested from our property. In our spare time we like to entertain friends, travel, and recreate (water ski and fish) with our son (age 11).

Committee on Agriculture  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Information Required From Non-governmental Witnesses

House rules require non-governmental witnesses to provide their resume or biographical sketch prior to testifying. If you do not have a resume or biographical sketch available, please complete this form.

1. Name: Susan Keister
2. Business Address: 7025 Harpers Ferry Road  
Wayland, NY 14572
3. Business Phone Number: 585-728-3044
4. Organization you represent: NONE (family tree farmer)
5. Please list any occupational, employment, or work-related experience you have which add to your qualification to provide testimony before the Committee:  
I am a graduate of the College of  
Environmental Science (1980), a forest  
owner (130+ acres), married to a NYS Forester,  
own/operate my own consulting forestry business.
6. Please list any special training, education, or professional experience you have which add to your qualifications to provide testimony before the Committee:  
See 5 above
7. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list the capacity in which you are representing that organization, including any offices or elected positions you hold:

PLEASE ATTACH THIS FORM OR YOUR BIOGRAPHY TO EACH COPY OF TESTIMONY.



Committee on Agriculture  
U.S. House of Representatives  
Required Witness Disclosure Form

House Rules\* require nongovernmental witnesses to disclose the amount and source of Federal grants received since October 1, 2004.

Name: Susan Keister  
Address: 7025 Harpers Ferry Rd Wayland, NY 1457  
Telephone: 585-728-3044  
Organization you represent (if any): /

1. Please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) you have received since October 1, 2004, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract. House Rules do **NOT** require disclosure of federal payments to individuals, such as Social Security or Medicare benefits, farm program payments, or assistance to agricultural producers:

Source: / Amount: /  
Source: / Amount: /

2. If you are appearing on behalf of an organization, please list any federal grants or contracts (including subgrants and subcontracts) the organization has received since October 1, 2004, as well as the source and the amount of each grant or contract:

Source: / Amount: /  
Source: / Amount: /

Please check here if this form is NOT applicable to you: /

Signature: Susan J Keister

\* Rule XI, clause 2(g)(4) of the U.S. House of Representatives provides: *Each committee shall, to the greatest extent practicable, require witnesses who appear before it to submit in advance written statements of proposed testimony and to limit their initial presentations to the committee to brief summaries thereof. In the case of a witness appearing in a nongovernmental capacity, a written statement of proposed testimony shall include a curriculum vitae and a disclosure of the amount and source (by agency and program) of each Federal grant (or subgrant thereof) or contract (or subcontract thereof) received during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years by the witness or by any entity represented by the witness.*

PLEASE ATTACH DISCLOSURE FORM TO EACH COPY OF TESTIMONY.